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Mimetic Conversion: A Narrative Approach of Dutch Reformed Piety

In his day the Dutch pastor Gijsbertus van Reenen (1864–1935) certainly was in favor of members of his congregation gathering to speak of their faith, share stories of their conversions and validate the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. At the same time, Van Reenen was concerned because these meetings, referred to as conventicles, often became a competition of sorts to see who could tell the most dramatic story of conversion. This was problematic for Van Reenen because, ironically, his particular religious tradition championed spiritual humility. Further, Van Reenen rejected the role of spiritual inspectors, seasoned believers present at the conventicles who offered instant judgment about the stories told.[1]

Van Reenen belonged to the *bevindelijk gereformeerden*, sometimes given the pejorative label ›black stocking churches‹. In reality, this denomination was a group of Christians who held to experience-oriented, conservative Calvinism. In historical perspective, they could also be labeled as the Reformed godly, a subculture of pious people, closely connected to Pietism.[2] The terms ›experience‹, ›godly‹ and ›pious‹ also describe an important hallmark of this group of believers in that they emphasized the conversion event.[3]

The emphasis on conversion makes this group of Dutch Reformed godly an interesting test case for the application of narrative approaches to historical movements, and so this contribution analyzes the religious culture of Dutch Reformed piety in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century from the perspective of the narrative community. This analysis is divided in five sections: I will first explain the concept of narrative community; I will then examine the origins and development of the morphology of conversion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Subsequently, I will discuss a case from Dutch piety

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1 K. van der Zwaag: Afwachten of verwachten? De toe-eigening des heils in historisch en theologisch perspectief. Heerenveen 2003, 620.

2 For an historiographical overview see Fred van Lieburg: Wege der niederländischen Pietismusforschung. Traditionsaneignung, Identitätspolitik und Erinneringskultur. In: PuN 37, 2011, 211–253.

3 Cf. C. S. L. Janse: Bewaar het pand. De spanning tussen assimilatie en persistentie bij de emancipatie van de bevindelijk gereformeerden. Houten 1985; Nicolette Hijweege: Bekering in bevindelijk gereformeerde kring. Een psychologische studie. Kampen 2004; Refogeschiedenis in perspectief. Opstellen over de bevindelijke traditie. Ed. by Fred van Lieburg. Heerenveen 2007.

in the late nineteenth century and analyze the specific dynamics of the Dutch pious narrative community. In conclusion, I will test the usefulness of a narrative approach for the study of Pietism and kindred cultures of piety.[4]

1 The Idea of a Narrative Community

Storytelling is an act of communication – a narrator, a listener and a subject are needed – offered in the context of a community or subculture. The individual identity and the group identity of a storytelling community is inherently narrative in character. According to the philosopher Richard Kearney such a community is in essence an ›imagined community‹, or in other words a narrative construction that is invented and re-constructed each time a story is (re)told. In Kearney's opinion, the narrative has a ›mimetic‹ function; that is, the story is a creative retelling of reality where hidden models and significances come to light. Through mimesis, via the story, reality receives sense, coherence and shape.[5]

The perceptions of Kearney can well be applied to religious cultures and communities. Using sociologist Andrew M. Greeley's basic model of the function of religion, we see clearly that every religious community is a ›story-telling community‹. This story-telling community processes its story in five circuitious steps: (1) religion starts with an experience that renews hope, (2) the experience is encoded in symbols understood and shaped by the community and (3) these symbols are shared with others through stories. (4) These stories define the ›story-telling community‹ and (5) the community shares the stories in their communal rituals.

Importantly, Greeley points out that the community is not a passive entity. As a carrier of a tradition, she has a critical function to test the stories for their validity and, if necessary, correct a narrator whose story is not (entirely) correlated with the community and its tradition. The community teaches the narrator to express the experience using the community's symbols and vocabulary. In this way, theological orthodoxy is the ›superstructure‹ of this critical function, while the popular foundation or ›substructure‹ supports the superstructure with story. Both are needed for an adequate functioning of the narrative community.[6] What Greeley calls the ›story-telling community‹, I call the narrative community.

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[4] This contribution is an updated version of my article Telling Authorized Stories: The Dynamics of the Dutch Pietistic Narrative Community. In: Religious Stories We Live By: Narrative Approaches in Theology and Religious Studies. Ed. by R. Ruard Ganzevoort [et al.]. Leiden, Boston 2013, 241–250.

[5] Richard Kearney: On Stories. Thinking in Action. London 2001.

[6] Andrew M. Greeley: Religion as Poetry. New Brunswick, NJ 1995, 23–56.

2 The Conversion Morphology

The narrative structure of the Dutch Reformed conversion story of the nineteenth and early twentieth century is centuries old, originating with early modern English Puritanism and its emphasis on preaching, pastoral care and writing. Those Puritan leaders drew attention to the necessity of personal conversion, and warned of the danger of self-deception. Further, the Puritan appeal was connected with the exhortation of a conscientious self-examination. To give shape to this self-examination the Puritans developed a chain of marks, the so-called ›marks of grace‹ with which the soul could test the authenticity of conversion. Along with this critical function, the marks of grace also aided the believer in understanding and translating spiritual experiences.

The marks of grace were the symbols of the Puritan narrative community. With the help of these symbols, members of the community could shape mimesis and thus render meaning and cohesion in their narrative identity. The chain of marks was often intended to measure the various successive spiritual stages through which the reborn soul passed. This is the so-called *ordo salutis*, the ›golden chain‹ of salvation: election, calling, regeneration, conversion, faith, justification, sanctification, and, *post mortem*, glorification. In Puritanism, these stages were recorded as early as the early seventeenth century. Various Puritan leaders extended the order of salvation by adding preparatory and middle stages.[7]

Thanks to the genre of the spiritual autobiography – and in spite of the differences between literacy and orality – we have some insights into the Puritan narrative practice. Writers often described and arranged their experiences with the help of the ›marks of grace‹ and thereby internalized the Puritan morphology of conversion.[8] Some writers internalized the entire morphology; others only used some stages of the morphology.[9] These autobiographies are really fossilized deposits of oral communication. Orality is of course far more dynamic than the written reports, but thanks to the written reports we do know something about the oral communication of conversion and these texts reveal the theology and preaching of the local pastors.

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[7] Edmund S. Morgan: Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea. New York 1963; Mark R. Shaw: Drama in the Meeting House: The Concept of Conversion in the Theology of William Perkins. In: The Westminster Theological Journal 45, 1983, 41–72; D. Bruce Hindmarsh: The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in early modern England. Oxford 2005, 35–38.

[8] Hindmarsh, The Evangelical Conversion Narrative [see note 7], 48–50, 53; Patricia Caldwell: The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression. Cambridge 1983.

[9] Tom Webster: Writing to Redundancy: Approaches to Spiritual Journals and Early Modern Spirituality. In: The Historical Journal 39, 1996, 33–56; Crawford Gribben: Lay Conversion and Calvinist Doctrine during the English Commonwealth. In: The Rise of the Laity in Evangelical Protestantism. Ed. by Deryk W. Lovegrove. London, New York 2002, 36–46.

In eighteenth-century Anglosaxon Puritanism, the boundaries of local narrative communities were fluid. Local communities were subsumed by a larger, international evangelical awakening movement. But the demographics did not change the content of the oral and written communication, stories of regeneration remained at the core of the narrative community. For example, an anonymus participating in a Methodist awakening in the eighteenth century wrote: »Nothing I can say makes so much impression on myself or others, as thus repeating my own conversion«.[10] Therefore personal conversion stories were told and retold. According to the historian Bruce Hindmarsh, this kind of storytelling leads to ›mimetic conversion‹ as others were encouraged to tell their own story.[11]

Puritan and pious narrative communities centered their stories on conversion. However, the form of organization and the moment of origin of these communities depended on existing structures and local circumstances so that the content and form of the stories were not always uniform. For some communities, the entire morphology of conversion was lacking while for others the entire *ordo salutis* was followed. And in some communities, the order of salvation was varied, depending on the theological tradition and the identity of the local pastor.

In a narrative community, new believers usually modeled their stories after the stories of established, authoritarian souls of the community. This oral communication stimulated the process of transcribing conversion stories, and this is yet another method of ›mimetic conversion‹. Written media, such as devotionals and spiritual autobiographies, stimulated ›mimetic conversion‹ because of the printed word presented to the reader conversion stories and modeled how to tell them. The result was a variety of models; some told their story in an entirely normative model while others used select parts of the model.[12] Of particular interest, the reading of autobiographies led to the development of a route of conversion with various stages, and was used by many new narrators and authors to structure their own story.[13] Thus the dynamics of the narrative community was stimulated and shaped both by orality and literacy.

3 The Story of a Spakenburger Fisherman

The narrative community of the Dutch godly can be considered an intersection of theology, preaching and inner-experience. These three aspects have mutual influence and wield power over the others.[14] The idea of a crossroad of com-

[10] Cited in Hindmarsh, The Evangelical Conversion Narrative [see note 7], 127.

[11] Hindmarsh, The Evangelical Conversion Narrative [see note 7], 156–159; cf. Caldwell, The Puritan Conversion Narrative [see note 8], 163–166.

[12] John Exalto: Wandelende bijbels. Piëtistische leescultuur in Nederland 1830–1960. Zoetermeer 2006; Fred van Lieburg: Reformed Doctrine and Pietist Conversion: The Historical Interplay of Theology, Communication and Experience. In: Paradigms, Poetics and Politics of Conversion. Ed. by Jan N. Bremmer [et al.]. Leuven 2006, 133–148.

[13] Cf. Gribben, Lay Conversion and Calvinist Doctrine [see note 9].

[14] Van Lieburg, Reformed Doctrine and Pietist Conversion [see note 12].

munications is analogous to Greeley's interference of superstructure and substructure. At regional and local levels, the narrative community was engaged in preaching, conventicles and daily, casual contact. For a correct understanding of the functioning of this crossroad of communication, local historical research is needed to analyze how theology, preaching and experience played out in each specific locale. However, for this contribution a general sketch of the developments can be traced.

Compared to the seventeenth-century Puritan chain of spiritual marks of the reborn soul, the order of salvation in Dutch Reformed piety in the nineteenth and twentieth century is a much longer route and follows the previous ›convictions‹ of a shocking and soul-shaking experience of conversion. In this understanding of conversion, the believer encounters Jesus and salvation comes into view. However, simply »seeing is not having«, and so the first step is the ›lopping off‹ (justification) of sins. This is a visual-dramatic moment in which the soul becomes totally indebted to Jesus so that its sins can be forgiven. Afterward, the surety of salvation is received. Next, the soul begins to know Jesus through intimate experience. Personal knowledge of the Father and the Holy Spirit ensues, sometimes with the confirmation of election. This order of salvation closely parallels the history of salvation from the fall in paradise (the ›lopping off‹), the advent, and the living out of the core moments of Jesus' life on earth: birth, suffering, death, resurrection, ascension, and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. During these centuries the Puritan order is not only extended with various preparatory stages, but also lengthened with a new and final stage, the so-called tribunal experience in the court of conscience.[15]

These dynamics of the narrative community are keenly illustrated by the story of Johannes Hartog (1840–1916), a resident of the fishing village of Spakenburg at the Zuiderzee. Hartog was a respectable citizen, a diligent fisherman, a faithful husband and a zealous Christian. But Hartog was initially critical (he confessed later that at this time he was in his unregenerated state) of the pastor of Spakenburg who, claimed Hartog, »failed to proclaim the whole counsel of God«.[16] Even unregenerated Johannes Hartog knew better than his pastor how the route to salvation was going. Nevertheless a cholera epidemic broke out in 1866 and Hartog lived with an existential mortal fear that he was afflicted by the cholera. The fisherman lay in bed for weeks with the assumption that death was very near. His earlier »self-conceit« was instantly gone, and lying on his

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15 Cornelis Graafland: De theologie van het conventikel. In: In De stille luyden. Bevindelijk gereformeerden in de negentiende eeuw. Ed. by Fred van Lieburg. Kampen 1994, 33–65.

16 Johannes Hartog: Voor den grootste der zondaren. Schets van de bekeeringsgeschiedenis van Johannes Hartog te Spakenburg, die de Heere met hem gehouden heeft in de jaren 1866 en 1867, door hem zelven in 1877 beschreven. Ouddorp 1931, 3.

supposed deathbed, Hartog's earlier theories of true conversion loosened their hold. As Hartog later recounted in his spiritual autobiography:

> In my earlier days, in my delusion, I dared to speak about the truth and about the conversion, but I knew nothing of it. Sure, at times I have said, am I ever blind and unhappy; I was not aware of anything, but oh, when the law of God was impressed on the mind with all its demands, then the intelligence of the intelligent is destroyed and the wisdom of the wise is brought to naught, then the tiger in sin becomes a lamb.[17]

Johannes Hartog knew himself as a sinner and thus the impossibility of his eternal preservation. He feared the wrath of God. He also wrote that he knew Jesus came to the world to save sinners, »but now I saw myself against a holy and righteous God, who will not leave the guilty unpunished«.[18] The pastor visited the fisherman and assured Hartog that, indeed, there was divine grace to save Hartog. At that moment, it seemed that the Spakenburger fisherman heard these words for the first time. Then, in another crucial turning point in Hartog's inner life, Hartog heard a powerful sermon and then accepted God's promise of salvation for his soul. Now fully assured of his salvation, Hartog shared his experiences at conventicles in Spakenburg.

But Hartog was not alone in sharing stories of conversion. In fact, Hartog's own aunt, Hendrikje Poort, shared »how she had lost and learned to lose herself, but how she then had found the Lord Jesus as her all-sufficient and willing Saviour«. When Hartog heard the story of his aunt, he was sorry that he had shared his conversion story. While he did indeed love the truth, Hartog now realized that he did not know the love of Jesus in his heart. Thus, the next morning, Hartog hurried to his pastor and told him that he, Johannes Hartog, feared that he had deceived the people. »The pastor then stood up, shook my hand and said to me: welcome to the fight, you must thank the Lord that He revealed this to you. You could have lived years without knowing your spiritual deprivation.«[19] A few months later, Hartog received, again during a sermon, the faith in Jesus as his personal Saviour. Again Hartog's pastor counseled him that he was most assuredly walking the route of salvation, even if Hartog had only taken his initial steps. The fisherman no doubt retold this entire story at the conventicles.

For our purposes, it is interesting to note how after his (first) conversion Johannes Hartog participated in and shaped the narrative community of Spakenburg. Hartog visited the conventicles, told his story and listened to other stories of the work of God in the souls of the community. But tellingly, the story of aunt Hendrikje differs from that of her nephew Johannes: the aunt told more, with the result that Hartog was convicted because his experiences were not like those of his aunt. The corrective effect of the aunt's narrative indicates that within the narrative community a story must meet certain criteria if the story is to be accepted by the community. Further, while Hartog's pastor was not present at the aforementioned evening, he nevertheless was an important voice in the local nar-

[17] Hartog, Voor den grootste der zondaren [see note 16], 11.
[18] Hartog, Voor den grootste der zondaren [see note 16], 13.
[19] Hartog, Voor den grootste der zondaren [see note 16], 17f.

rative community of the godly. Though the pastor did not dismiss Hartog's story, the pastor did judge Hartog an immature believer in comparison to the others. Thus the pastor played a pivotal role in the narrative community: he counselled new converts, preached to the entire community of believers, and was the final arbiter of conversion stories.

4 The Dynamics of the Dutch Narrative Community

The theologian Cornelis Graafland saw a strong, uniform model of salvation in the nineteenth century Dutch pious stories of conversion.[20] But the case of Johannes Hartog shows that this observation needs to be tested: the stories of Hartog and his aunt were inconsistent, and only after later experiences was Hartog at the same ›level‹ as his aunt. In other words, autobiographies such as those of Hartog exemplify a more reliable record of history and can be considered as fossilized deposits of oral communication. By examining autobiographies such as these, we see that the dynamics of the narrative community were strongly demonstrated in sermons and letters, and the oral communication most vivid at the conventicles, and there most acute when new believers received instruction and spiritual guideance from the seasoned believers.[21] »Nobody measured his spiritual path using a yardstick«, wrote the pious farmer Johannes van Vuuren (1856–1932) in 1924 because »there are as many different paths as there are true conversions«.[22] When Van Vuuren wrote this adage, no doubt he was aware that his story could serve as a model for others, even if that was not his intention. Yet, many pious people nevertheless did measure their spiritual paths against the spoken or written stories of others, a process described as ›mimetic conversion‹.

When we apply Greeley's model to the community of the Dutch Reformed godly, the diverse spiritual stages can then be interpreted as symbols in the context of the narrative community. With the help of these symbols, members of the community gave shape to the mimesis in conformity to the greater, normative story of the narrative community and thus rendered meaning and cohesion to their narrative identity. This ›spiritual vocabulary‹ gave the subject a narrative identity and helped him to know his own place on the path to heaven, while giving him tools to discuss it with others. Thus he could be led further on that path because the symbols and vocabulary made communication with fellow travellers possible. Seasoned believers tested, guided and, where necessary, corrected the stories of new believers. This action is the last phase in Greeley's model, the communal rituals, and this occurred at two key places: during church services when the

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[20] Graafland, De theologie van het conventikel [see note 15].

[21] Cf. Exalto, Wandelende bijbels [see note 12].

[22] Johannes van Vuuren: Laatste woord van een vader aan zijn kinderen. Levensgeschiedenis van Johannes van Vuuren, geboren te Haaften en overleden te Utrecht op 19 mei 1932 in den ouderdom van 75 jaren. Gorinchem 1976, 57.

pastor explained the order of salvation (possibly followed by pastoral aftercare), and at the conventicles when the participants engaged in direct conversations.

The normative order of salvation was only seldom explicated at worship or the conventicles. This is because this salvation order is not a rational construction structure, but rather a category of experience lived out in life. As a gift of the Spirit, this experience is not a believer's to enforce, only his to receive. Of primary importance was the believer's recognition of his sinful state that was in need of regenerating grace. This conformed to the first of a threefold phase set out in the Heidelberg Catechism, a dominant confession used by a wide range of orthodox Reformed churches. The Reformed godly interpreted the three distinctions of the Catechism – misery, redemption and gratitude, or sometimes learned as ›sin, salvation, service‹ or ›guilt, grace, gratitude‹ – as a description of salvific events that needed to be experienced successively.

Yet at the same time, pious pastors warned against ›spiritual drilling‹ or direct application of the order of salvation as a strong and frozen model. The aforementioned Gijsbertus van Reenen was suspicious of the work of spiritual inspectors because they rendered judgments about the stories at the conventicles, yet in reality their heartless behaviour scared off new believers. Thus pastors such as Van Reenen rightly questioned what such inspectors really knew about conversion, for the path to salvation was individual and not restricted to one normative model with prescribed, compulsory stages. Thus the pastors and the spiritual inspectors policed the stories (albeit with different criteria) while the actual story tellers such as Johannes Hartog offered the stories to be judged. In this way, according to Greeley, the community was shaped by the superstructure (ministers and inspectors) and fed by the substructure (story tellers).

5 Conclusion

In seventeenth century Puritanism, a morphology of conversion was developed where godly people tested the quality of their conversion experiences. In Dutch piety the morphology was adapted and later extended with additional stages in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As in early modern English Puritanism, modern Dutch Reformed piety lacked uniform morphology or order of salvation. This teaching varied by time, place and person.

The subjective appropriation of the conversion morphology was the central theme of the narrative community of the godly. This narrative community, looking at it from an ethnological perspective, existed halfway into the twentieth century – as far as the sources could give information – as a dynamic, believable culture for group members. It satisfied the mechanisms of narrativity as sketched by Kearney and Greeley. The group culture of the godly was an ›imagined community‹, constructed at the moment the participants told stories about the work of God in their souls. The stories had a double mimetic function: first, the story

itself is mimesis, for inner experiences were told in linguistic symbols; second, the stories of the experts led to mimesis by the novices as they adopted the stories and applied them to their own inner life. Throughout this process new believers found their place in the community, added their voice to the narrative community and gave their spiritual life shape and meaning.

The circular five-step-model of Greeley is fairly straightforward and applicable to the pious narrative community. Participants encoded their experience in the symbols of the narrative community, the stages or hallmarks of the order of salvation and the morphology of conversion. They shared their experiences with the help of the symbols with their group participants and so contributed to the communal rituals of the story-telling community. The circular character of the narrative community is also applicable to Pietism and piety, and evinces the existence of a superstructure and a substructure.[23] A consequence of the five-step-plan was that new believers told stories which were authorized by the experts and inspectors.

At some point the models of Kearney and Greeley need to be completed and corrected. Both models presume a good working narrative community, but give no attention to disintegrating factors. It also seems that both models presume that in the community only one type of story is told. In reality, as we have seen, different stories were told at varying tempi in the narrative community of this era. These stories differ by more or less intersections and spiritual stages (e.g. Hartog and his aunt), by the values awarded to intersections preceding the justification, by the experience of the tribunal experience, and by the non-canonic, individual stories refuted by the experts of the community. These variations and stratifications in stories need further reflection. And finally, these stories need to be contextualized within the broad, rich field of storytelling of Reformed and other confessional manifestations of piety and Pietism, a religious culture with a gold mine of stories about true and false conversions, miracles and hoaxes, angels and demons, and godly and ungodly sinners.[24]

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[23] In this contribution I have focussed on Dutch Reformed piety, but the model is, of course, also applicable to German Pietism. Cf. in this context the studies by Jonathan Strom: Constructing Religious Experience: Conversion Narratives in Hallensian Pietism. In: Aus Gottes Wort und eigener Erfahrung gezeiget. Erfahrung – Glauben, Erkennen und Gestalten im Pietismus. 2 Bde. Hg. v. Christian Soboth u. Udo Sträter. Halle 2012, Bd. 1, 107–129; Magnus Schlette: Die Selbst(er-)findung des Neuen Menschen. Zur Entstehung narrativer Identitätsmuster in der Frömmigkeitsgeschichte des Pietismus. Göttingen 2005.

[24] Cf. Spoken op het kerkhof. Verkenningen van protestantse vertelcultuur. Ed. by John Exalto and Fred van Lieburg. Zoetermeer 2009; Fred van Lieburg: Pietismus. In: Enzyklopädie des Märchens 10, 2002, 1047–1056; Folklore als Tatsachenbericht. Ed. by Jürgen Beyer and Reet Hiiemäe. Tartu 2001.